

WILL THE IRAQIS FIGHT FOR THE WEST?

From the Bagdad Slum, It Looks Dubious

RAY ALAN

BAGDAD has a strangely insubstantial air. In color everything is a muddy brown—the flimsy buildings, the turbulent Tigris, the clothes of the people—and the general effect is of a half-completed film set in a studio whose painters are on strike. The main trouble is lack of stone. Buildings are put up with only rudimentary—or, in the poorest quarters, no—foundations; walls are made of mud or flattened-out gasoline cans; the few asphalted main streets ripple and undulate like tablecloths at a picnic; and the squalid alleys in which nine-tenths of the capital's inhabitants live are surfaced only with caked earth, garbage, and dung. The glamorous, glittering metropolis of the Abbasid caliphs might well have been on another planet. It only needs, one feels, a dust storm or flood a notch above average (and this is the land not only of floods but of the Flood) for the whole city to vanish overnight.

The same feeling extends to politics. An affable sheikh I met on the desert bus from Damascus turned out to be a member of

WHAT was once the Garden of Eden has now run dreadfully to seed; Iraq, though it possesses a wealth of cultivable land and an abundant water supply, supports half the population it had a thousand years ago. The incubus weighing upon the country, RAY ALAN writes, is landlordism and corruption. At the moment Great Britain is throwing its support to the landlord clique, and the sending of American arms to Iraq is being seriously proposed. According to Mr. Alan, a potentially dangerous situation is developing in which reform and modern innovation are becoming associated with the Soviet East, and the ruling group is being strengthened—for what? Mr. Alan, a British journalist specializing in the Near East, contributed "Ramadan Sundown with Modern Improvements" to the May 1953 COMMENTARY.

BAGDAD

Parliament with a bitterly anti-British record. A friendly taxi driver who refused to accept payment for a run he considered too short to be worth bothering about was recently, I learned afterwards, a leading member of a mob engaged in stoning Europeans and burning their property. A neat new Anglo-Iraqi treaty, signed at Portsmouth on January 15, 1948 and described by the late Ernest Bevin as the keystone of a projected arch of Middle Eastern alliances, crumbled to sand under the first stress a few days later. The closer one's scrutiny, the stronger one's impression that Iraq's whole political edifice, from foundation to summit, is as shoddy and as unsteady as a Bagdad slum.

AT THE apex of Iraqi affairs balances the Hashemite monarchy. Until the 1919-20 peace settlement placed the territory under British mandate, Mesopotamia had for four centuries been part of the Ottoman Empire. That the future state of Iraq should be a monarchy was decided by a conference of British officials called by Winston Churchill, then Colonial Secretary, in Cairo in 1921. The previous year had seen a costly revolt in the tribal areas of the lower and middle Euphrates—a major source of dissatisfaction being the efficiency of the British tax gatherers who collected more than three times as much revenue as their Turkish predecessors—and it was felt that no less impressive an initiative would suffice to give the new country a sense of unity, soothe nationalist sentiment, and dam currents of opinion that were flowing towards Kemalist Turkey and Bolshevik Russia.

The Cairo conference served both Britain and Iraq well by recommending for the kingship T. E. Lawrence's ally, the Emir Feisal, an Arab warrior-statesman of heroic

stature whom the French had the previous year expelled from Syria.* (At the same conference it was decided to buy Feisal's less impressive brother Abdullah off from a half-hearted attack on the French by offering him an Emirate of his own in Transjordan. The Hashemites would thus have become the dominant dynastic bloc in the Arab world had not the Emirs' father, the Sherif Hussein of Mecca, been ousted shortly afterwards from his ancestral Hejaz by the late Abdul-Aziz ibn Saud who went on to found the anti-Hashemite kingdom of Saudi Arabia.) The Iraqis' acceptance of Feisal was markedly unenthusiastic—indeed, they showed little appreciation of his outstanding qualities until after his death—but the British mandatory administration, deeming the momentousness of the occasion to justify the use of somewhat un-British methods, succeeded in obtaining a plebiscite result in his favor of 96 per cent. There followed a decade of friendly collaboration between the King and successive British High Commissioners which culminated in the Anglo-Iraqi treaty of 1930, whereby, two years later, Iraq achieved independence and Britain secured important strategic and political privileges.

King Feisal's English-educated son Ghazi, who succeeded his father in 1933 at the age of twenty-one, went out of his way to play to the nationalist gallery. He expressed approval of his army's barbarous massacre of the pro-British Assyrian Christians, conferring the title Pasha on the prime organizer of the outrage, General Bakr Sidqi. He laid claim to the British protectorate of Kuwait, denounced British sponsorship of Zionism in Palestine, and maintained unhealthily close relations with anti-British politicians and army officers. An indisputably Anglophile

*Two years before the Cairo conference he had made the famous Feisal-Weizmann agreement with the future president of Israel and had written to Felix Frankfurter: "We Arabs, especially the educated among us, look with the deepest sympathy on the Zionist movement. . . . We will wish the Jews a most hearty welcome home. . . . We are working together for a reformed and revived Near East and our two movements complete one another. . . . Indeed, I think that neither can be a real success without the other."

Providence involved him in a fatal automobile accident three weeks after Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia, just in time to prevent him from inflicting any lasting damage on Britain's sufficiently unsteady defensive arrangements in the Near East. Nationalist elements inevitably took it for granted that the British Foreign Office had nudged Providence's elbow and the British Consul at Mosul was murdered in reprisal.

ON MAY 2 last year Ghazi's eighteen-year-old son was enthroned in the Iraqi capital as Feisal II. The interregnum had been filled by the boy's uncle, the safely pro-British and unpopular Emir Abdul-Ilah, acting as Regent. Nationalist hotheads, whose numbers have swollen since even King Ghazi's heyday, are now proclaiming their confidence that the young monarch will lead on from where his father left off and initiate a break with Britain and a united Arab onslaught on Israel; in private, however, they admit misgivings as to the effects of his prolonged English education.

The British Embassy, too, has high hopes of Feisal II; but its more realistic officials are far from sanguine. Even if Feisal suppresses the—at his age, and in present circumstances—almost overpowering temptation to seek popularity cheaply, he may feel that filial loyalty obliges him to follow in the footsteps of his father, of whom he has a dangerously idealized mental picture. He is conscious, moreover, that a great deal is expected of him by the nationalists; and he knows that if he is to fulfill their hopes, and secure the Hashemite dynasty more firmly in his people's affections than it has been during the last decade, his father's flamboyant methods are more likely to win acclaim than the patient "collaborationist" statesmanship of Feisal I. Another factor influencing his outlook in this sphere would be the element of youthful rivalry animating his relation with his second cousin Hussein of Jordan, enthroned the same day in Amman. Finally, British officials cannot refrain from reflecting on the disquieting coincidence that those other young Arab rulers who received what

Whitehall prescribes as the ideal English education for an Oriental prince—Ghazi, Farouk, and Talal—all reacted most unfavorably in later years. Waterloo may indeed have been won on the playing fields at Eton; but a distressing amount of the Middle East seems to have been lost on the hill at Harrow.

IRAQI independence came of age last October. In the twenty-one years that have elapsed since the termination of the British mandate, Iraq has had thirty-five changes of government, seven of them by military *coup d'état*. But none of the changes has ever upset the plutocratic character of the regime or liberalized it more than temporarily. Authority remains concentrated within the same charmed circle of landowning city notables and feudal sheikhs that has dominated Iraqi affairs since the departure of the Turks. From time to time individuals within the circle have incited tribes to revolt and troops to mutiny, and have intrigued with the Palace, the General Staff, and representatives of foreign states—the Iraqi air force has even been used to bomb Bagdad—in order to advance their personal interests and raise themselves a rung or two up the ladder of power; but electoral fraud, press censorship, and, in the last resort, police and military measures have so far been successful in keeping at bay the vociferous, frustrated middle class of lawyers, journalists, clerks, merchants' sons, junior army officers, and officials, inclined increasingly to the political left, that has emerged during the last two decades.

Doyen of the Iraqi oligarchy is Ottoman-trained Nuri Pasha es-Said, eleven times Prime Minister and on numerous occasions Foreign Minister, Defense Minister, and Chairman of the Senate. Nuri Pasha alone has consistently, over the years, maintained the first Feisal's policy of collaboration with Britain, manipulating elections and nationalist sentiment alike with a sustained brilliance rare in the mercurial Middle East and, nowadays, unique in his devotion to the unpopular cause of friendship with an im-

perial power. With the exception of the late King Abdullah of Jordan, Britain has had no more reliable friend in the modern Arab world; yet time may show that few men of his caliber have done Britain more long-term harm. Nuri's unconcealed contempt for such sacred cows as democracy and social justice, to which most Arab politicians at least pay lip service, have scared away from Britain (for every Arab regards him as a British agent) the rising reformist elements, passionately radical and iconoclastic, which Britain and other Western nations will one day have to come to terms with if the Near East is not to go the way of China.

Nuri Pasha is outstanding among Arab leaders for his candor. He has told the West quite bluntly, for instance, that Bagdadi public opinion would not favor Iraqi membership in a Near East defense organization associated with the NATO powers. (In Damascus dictator Adib Shishakli knows the same is true of Syrian opinion but has no scruples against keeping Western hopes alive for as long as British aircraft and American tanks are forthcoming.) He makes no pretense that Iraqi elections are free. In an interview with an Egyptian newspaper early in 1946 he declared without embarrassment that in "arranging" elections to the Chamber of Deputies seats are allocated first to "all former prime ministers, [then] to all ministers who have been in office more than twice, eminent ex-officials receiving government pensions, tribal sheikhs, and so on." These nominees, he went on, "fill about 60 per cent of the Chamber; allocation of the remainder depends for the most part on the wishes of the government in power, though such private individuals as desire may put themselves forward for consideration." For the Iraqi Senate there is not even this much of an election: all senators are nominated by the Palace.

Demands for electoral reform were the mainspring of the destructive riots at Bagdad and Kerbela in November 1952, and the election which followed, in January, was conducted under a revised procedure which camouflaged the managing of the results

to a slight extent. The notorious "secondary electors" who were the kingpins of the old "indirect" system of voting reappeared as members of the electoral committees which registered votes on behalf of the 90 per cent of the electorate that is illiterate. (One of their duties was to make the appropriate adjustment where ballot boxes were found to contain more votes than there had been voters!) But to avoid any slip between cup and lip all anti-government political leaders and their chief supporters were arrested and all anti-government newspapers and meetings were suppressed.*

POLITICAL parties have been banned for most of Iraq's twenty-one years of independence. Those that had sprung into being under the British administration were abolished, in the name of "national unity," when the mandate came to an end. Over a dozen parties mushroomed into existence in 1946, when their formation was at last sanctioned (though only in Bagdad), but the Palestine war soon gave the authorities another occasion to impose unrelieved authoritarianism in the "national" cause.

From 1949 to the end of 1952 restrictions were again relaxed and five parties were formed, one by Nuri es-Said and four by opposition elements. Two of these—the National Democratic and Independence parties—represent, for the first time in Iraqi politics, the crystallization of a constant trend of opinion. In their ranks are being shaped the Iraqi leaders of tomorrow.

The National Democratic party (*chesb el-*

*On this election the London *Times* commented editorially that its "two most notable features" were "the orderly atmosphere in which it was conducted"—a euphemism for martial law—"and the size of the majority given to the followers of Nuri es-Said." The Iraqi Foreign Minister's delighted aside on reading this was: "It would have been even more notable had the majority been a small one!" The comment is typical of the sort of pious nonsense—dutifully injected into the columns of papers such as the *Times* and the *Economist*, which are believed in the Arab capitals to echo Whitehall's official opinion, and maliciously embellished by the Arabic press—that has done so much to blacken Britain's reputation in Near Eastern eyes in recent years.

Watani ed-Dimuqrati) professes something like an ideological approach to politics on British socialist lines. Its leaders are a millionaire landowner, Kamil el-Chadirchi, and a wealthy Mosul notable named Mohamed Hadib, presently in voluntary exile in England. All the most prominent members of this party received an English or American education but their outlook has in recent years become strongly anti-Western. The British and United States embassies in Bagdad return the compliment, denouncing them as pro-Russian. They are undoubtedly "neutralist," and when the Korean war broke out their paper *Sada el-Ahali* put the blame on "American aggression"; but this is a consequence more of disillusionment with Britain than of infatuation with Russia. The National Democratic leaders rashly led their followers to expect great things of the British Labor government and are still reeling from the shock they suffered when Mr. Attlee's cabinet made clear its intention of maintaining the Foreign Office's traditional support for the feudal oligarchies of the Arab world. The late Ernest Bevin and his advisers not merely cold-shouldered groups like el-Chadirchi's, which a more enlightened policy could have saved from Moscow's embrace, but actually encouraged the Arab governments to take active measures against them. It is hardly surprising that the dismayed reformists reacted with a leftward jerk.

The ultra-nationalist Independence party—Istiqlal—is outstanding even by Arab standards for its virulent xenophobia. It is scurrilously anti-Western, anti-Christian, anti-Jewish, and anti-Turkish, and finds time also for sly denigration of the Hashemite monarchy. It urges a "second round" in Israel (and, unlike most Arab parties that talk in this idiom, really wants one), creation of an Iraqi-dominated Syrian-Iraqi-Jordanian union, and "armed neutrality" in the cold war. An official of the party asked its acting president, Mohamed Mahdi Kubba, on my behalf to define this phrase. Kubba replied that provided the democracies satisfied Iraq's "minimum national demands"—which he modestly defined as including abrogation of

the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi treaty, liquidation of British bases, and nationalization of the Iraq Petroleum Company*—Iraqis “would not be hostile” to the West, though they would resist any attempt to use their country for military purposes. He added that Iraq’s attitude towards the transit of Russian forces across her territory would, of necessity, be “non-defensive.” (One of his collaborators said that provided the Russians were on their way to outflank Turkey and not attack an Arab state “our good wishes would go with them.”) Istiqlal is better organized than most Arab parties and maintains close contacts with similar “right-wing” and “Islamic-socialist” groups in Egypt, Syria, and North Africa. Some of its foreign links pass through the hands of Haj Amin el-Husseini, ex-Mufti of Jerusalem, and the Arab League’s office for “North African liberation” in Cairo. It is also in touch with the Saudi court through its exiled honorary president, Rashid Ali el-Gailani, organizer of the pro-Nazi military coup of 1941.

The National Democratic and Independence parties were, when legal, the strongest political organizations in Iraq. The latter was in the lead numerically, claiming around ten thousand adherents, and more popular in the army than its rival, but the intellectual superiority of el-Chadirchi’s following, of some importance in a largely illiterate country, helped restore the balance.

IN COMMON with all other political movements in Iraq, Communism has enjoyed only brief periods of legality. The Iraqi Communist leadership has, moreover, suffered frequent schisms through disagreement over personal and tactical issues. If one bears in mind also such natural organizational obstacles as the size of the country, poor communications, mass illiteracy, and the formidable racial, religious, and social chasms which divide Arab from Kurd, Shiite

from Sunni, and discontented peasantry from proselytizing middle-class “intelligentsia,” the Bagdad Criminal Investigation Department’s maximum figure of forty to forty-five thousand Communists in the whole of Iraq does not appear to be an underestimate; and even of this number—under 1 per cent of the population, compared with about 8 per cent in more compact, more literate Lebanon—considerably less than a quarter are thought to be convinced Marxists.

Communism is, however, gaining ground in Iraq—and unless substantial social and political reforms are realized, will accelerate its rate of advance as educational facilities spread and communications improve. As in most Arab countries the privileged classes are among the Communists’ best allies. One of the most effective ways of interesting any budding reformer in Communism—whether his pet panacea is trade-union rights or piped sewage disposal—is to call him a Communist, bang him on the head, and fling him into an internment camp. *Liwa el-Istiqlal*, organ of the Independence party, has said of this Near Eastern custom:

“As is well known, numerous young men are [periodically] arrested as ‘Communists.’ In fact, when taken into custody, they are nothing of the sort. But as a result of this experience, and of ill-treatment at the hands of the police, they leave prison convinced Communists, 100 per cent.”

On occasion, an equally disastrous subtlety has been manifested in Bagdad. Whenever Russian interest or influence in the Near East has seemed to be in the ascendant (as during the Azerbaijani scare in Persia) the Iraqi government—fearing, perhaps, an outbreak of popular unrest which Moscow might be able to exploit—has nervously promised reforms and adopted a more tolerant attitude. The moment the crisis has passed, reforms and liberalization have been shelved. Had Nuri Pasha and his colleagues wished to condition the Iraqi public to associate Russia with reform they could scarcely have done more.

On the morrow of Hitler’s war the Iraqi Communists founded two “front” organi-

*The I.P.C. is British-managed but owned jointly by British, Anglo-Dutch, French, and American groups (23% per cent each) and a British-naturalized Armenian, Mr. C. S. Gulbenkian (5 per cent)—a real-life Arabian Nights hero.

zations—the semi-underground National Liberation party and the wholly legal Anti-Zionist League which was allowed to run its own daily paper. These were succeeded in 1948 by the Peace Partisans' movement. Both the National Democratic and Independence parties—more particularly the latter—have undergone a certain amount of Communist penetration, and the Communists seem content, now, to merge their identity with those of opposition groups of this type. Some resident Western observers are of the opinion that the underground Communist organization is not very effective. "The point is," an English resident of Baghdad told me, "that the Communists here are just as inefficient as all the other Iraqis." Nevertheless, it seems likely that demand will ultimately create supply—and demand there certainly is in every part of Iraq.

THE four million Iraqis dependent on agriculture (80 per cent of the population) are for the most part indebted serf-tenants worse off, even, than the Syrian fellahin.* For all agriculture south of the Kirkuk-Haditha pipeline—just over two-thirds of the total—is dependent on irrigation, and whereas the average Syrian peasant has to carry on his back only his admittedly rapacious landlord, most Iraqis must labor under the burden of water-rights owner, pump owner, and *sarkal* (sub-sheikh) as well. In flow-irrigated areas (where no pumps are used) peasants retain an average of one-fifth of their crops for themselves and their families; in pump-irrigated districts their share may be only one-tenth or less. It is, therefore, with something like Luddite horror that the farmers of the "primitive" rain-fed north, who manage to keep half their crops, are greeting the extension of irrigation projects and pump installations to their region. "Development," however many complacent liberal hearts it may set aglow in the West, can all too easily deteriorate into just another means of enriching the landlords and enslaving

the people it is supposed to uplift unless accompanied by basic reforms in the realms of land tenure and water rights. To put the problem at its simplest: the more the value of privately owned land is increased as a result of development, the higher the rent its owner is justified in asking.

The burden of these depredations is in no way lightened by the awakening peasants' knowledge that the authority whereby they are exploited is usurped. When Iraq attained independence, nearly five-sixths of all her cultivated land was either state domain or collective tribal property. Were this still so, development would present few problems. In the intervening years, however, most of this priceless asset has been parceled out among the ruling-class families and their political supporters; and the sheikhs, taking advantage of the ignorance of their illiterate tribesmen, have been allowed, in return for political services, to register tribal land in their own names and assume landlord status—with their tribesmen as rent-paying tenants. One of Nuri es-Said's last acts as Prime Minister in 1952, in preparation for the approaching election, was to transfer tracts of state domain in the Amara district to local sheikhs as the price of their tribal votes.

Of a typical Amara sheikh an unpublished British official report, prepared for the wartime Middle East Supply Center, has this to say: "He is . . . too big a man to be a farmer and too indolent, corrupt, and uneducated to make of himself anything else. As regards agricultural activity, the sheikh is completely unimportant; he takes little interest in seed or ground preparation and is more ignorant than his farmers about such matters."

Men like this—avaricious speculators with not a grain of national or social conscience—now dominate more than two-thirds of the Iraqi countryside and are able to hold not merely agriculture but the whole national economy to ransom: they control both parliament and the entire rural administration and cannot even be obliged to bear an appropriate fiscal load; and there is no prospect, in the foreseeable future, of their strangle-

*See the present writer's "Palace Politics in the Damascus Oasis" in COMMENTARY, February 1953.

hold being broken—by constitutional means.

Iraq has five times as much cultivable land as Egypt, with a population only a quarter as big, and two great rivers nourished by the abundant snows of Anatolia and Kurdistan. During the four centuries before Mohammed, under the Persian Sasanids, the country supported more than twice its present number of inhabitants. It could do so again. The Directorate of Irrigation in Baghdad estimates that existing supplies of water are ample for an immediate 30 per cent expansion of the area under cultivation; and on completion of combined flood control and water-storage works now under way an increase of 350 per cent will be attainable.

Yet of the nominally cultivated land for which water supplies are already adequate, less than half is cropped annually: this is due partly to underpopulation in some areas and inefficiency in all—but mainly to the system of landownership and tenure which robs the peasant of all incentive to expand the scope of his activities, improve his methods, and increase his output. Human greed, corruption, and irresponsibility have turned the site of the Garden of Eden into a wilderness of squalor and exploitation comparable to Egypt and China. The cultivator whose annual income, in cash and kind, exceeds \$80 is doing well: for the majority the figure is under \$70. Intestinal and venereal diseases, trachoma, and malaria are the rule rather than the exception. Five infants out of ten die before they reach the age of five. On balance, the average Iraqi peasant is worse off today than was his grandfather under the Turks.

THESE conditions could, undoubtedly, be improved by intelligent use of Iraq's huge oil earnings. The Iraqi Treasury will collect from the I.P.C. this year some 130 million dollars in royalties, taxes, and shared profits, and by 1956 Iraq's income from oil—since production is expanding—will be approximately 170 million dollars annually.

In 1950 it was announced that 70 per cent of the country's oil earnings would, in future, be devoted to "development and edu-

cation," and a Central Development Board was set up. On British advice the Board was to be non-political and non-ministerial, so as to lessen the chances of its falling under the influence of private interests; but this aim has been only imperfectly realized and the Board has become the center of violent controversy. It is variously accused of lining the pockets of the big landowners, sheikhs, and government politicians, and favoring them in its choice of projects; of inefficiency resulting from nepotism over-staffing; of creating a new privileged class of its own officials; and of siphoning off development funds for military and police purposes (e.g., the purchase of jet aircraft and the construction of barracks). Not all these charges are sustainable; but they have aroused so much ill-feeling towards the Board in Baghdad that the government has been forced to take action. Last May the Board was given a new chairman (Sayid Dhia ed-Din Jafar) and the public was promised a fresh start.

The Board's major achievement to date has been its completion of the pre-war Lake Habbaniya project (started under the Ottoman regime!) for the diversion of Euphrates flood water and its storage for summer use. It has also built an unspecified number of schools and houses—the latter mainly for its officials—and has expanded Iraq's hopelessly inadequate road network.

Another flood-control scheme, linking the Tigris (which regularly inundates Baghdad) with the Wadi Tharthar depression northwest of the capital, is under way, having been primed with a loan of \$12,800,000 from the Washington World Bank in 1950.

At Hilla and Mussaiyib, just over fifty miles south of Baghdad, fifteen-hundred-year-old irrigation canals are to be brought back into use and extended. Dams are to be built on three tributaries of the Tigris—the Greater Zab, the Lesser Zab, and the Diyala—and a new Euphrates barrage is contemplated. Drainage and road-building are to be carried out in the areas these irrigation projects will open to more intensive settlement. Two state-owned oil refineries are to be built, at Baghdad and near Basra.

Few of these projects will, however, bring substantial benefits to the average Iraqi peasant without a drastic overhaul of the country's rural social structure and its system of landlordism and tenancy and of the ownership of water rights, pumps, and irrigation canals.

TWENTY-ONE years of independence have registered important gains for Iraq's three-million-strong Shiite community.* Iraq has always been the center of the Shiite cosmos, in which the shrines of the Imam Ali at Nejef and his son Hussein at Kerbela are no less sacred than the Kaba at Mecca. Annual pilgrimages to these holy cities bring together Shiites from all over the Islamic world, and are of some significance also as occasions for the dissemination of venereal disease—on arrival at the shrines pilgrims are permitted to contract a form of temporary marriage (*mita*), with local ladies freely available for the purpose, which is dissolved when they leave—and of anti-Western propaganda, in the fabrication of which the influential local *Mujtahids* (Shiite divines) and the followers of the Mullah Kashani, who lead the important Persian contingents, seem to vie with one another. Camels and donkeys plod into Nejef all the year round bringing the corpses of pious Shiites for burial there.

The Shiites outnumber the orthodox Sunni Moslems in Iraq by about 40 per cent; and the Sunni minority is split into mutually mistrustful Arabs and Kurds, with the latter predominating slightly. The new Iraqi state was, nevertheless, under Sunni Arab domination from the start. The chief notables and landowners of Ottoman Mesopotamia had been Sunnis; and the Turks, of the same persuasion, had favored them, disliking the Shiites even more than they disliked the Mesopotamian Arabs as a whole. The Shiites had, moreover, throughout Islamic history, been anti-aristocratic, anti-feudal malcontents and insurgents, mistrusted by Arab and Turk alike.

*For a brief account of the origins and beliefs of the Shiites see COMMENTARY for June 1952.

When independence came, the Shiite sheikhs won themselves a niche among the favored few—chiefly by threatening tribal revolts—and acquired large tracts of land. In the capital, where they were in a majority, the Shiites benefited most from the economic activity Bagdad's new status provoked, and the new middle class sprang mainly from their ranks. After the Palestine war Shiite interests acquired most of the businesses left behind by Jews emigrating to Israel. Today, many ambitious Shiites, in search of a short-cut to that political supremacy which they feel their community is entitled to, tend increasingly to campaign against the still largely Sunni ruling class and royal family on religious grounds.

That so many Shiites are anti-British is due to Britain's past association, and apparent mutual dependence pact, with these unpopular Sunni elements. After the Second World War the British embassy in Bagdad attempted to combine the tasks of wooing the Shiites and finding a dependable successor to the aging Nuri es-Said by grooming Saleh Jabr, a prominent Shiite notable, as *homme de confiance*. After the usual cooked elections he became Iraq's first Shiite Prime Minister in March 1947. (Nuri, to help keep an eye on things, was appointed Chairman of the Senate.) Saleh's enthusiasm for his new role soon ebbed. In January 1948, seduced (he now says) by promises of a glorious walkover for the Iraqi army in Palestine, he signed Bevin's abortive Portsmouth treaty—and was obliged to take refuge from his enraged compatriots and co-religionists in a remote tribal area.

IT WAS fear that another attempt to put across a Portsmouth-type treaty would follow the winter election that largely underlay the opposition parties' violent insistence on electoral reform in the fall of 1952. The election did produce an unmistakably Nuri-minded government; but the memory of the anti-Western riots in which the opposition's campaign culminated is still sufficiently vivid to deter treaty-making tendencies on both sides for some time.

In any event, the whole problem of superseding the 1930 treaty, before it expires, by an alternative arrangement which might reconcile Iraqi susceptibilities with Britain's strategic needs has become rather academic. No durable strategic formula, acceptable to Iraqi opinion and of real value to Western planners, is likely to emerge from purely bilateral Anglo-Iraqi consultations. A combined Anglo-French-Turkish-American approach might yield results, provided Britain were willing to evacuate her treaty air bases at Habbaniya (near Bagdad) and Shaiba (near Basra), though the word "results" in this kind of context, in the Arab world, rarely means more than an exchange of face-saving platitudes, so turned as to induce a maximum of complacency in public opinion and win a maximum of credit for the diplomats concerned, but quite devoid of any practical significance. No Iraqi government would be likely to concede the Western allies even as much as they would be forced to take for themselves in the event of war; and the essential thing is for the West to have adequately equipped mobile forces within reach to do the taking.*

BRTAIN, fortunately, still has troops and planes in Jordan, though even there, despite the financial palliative, anti-treaty sentiment is making itself felt. The nearest Rus-

*Iraq's attitude to Israel remains basically unchanged. Anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli speeches and newspaper editorials are still the order of the day and Iraqi public opinion is constantly reminded that Iraq alone, of the main Arab participants in the invasion of Israel, has not concluded an armistice with the "Zionist bands" and is therefore free to march again whenever she wishes. King Feisal, in his speech from the throne to the Iraq Parliament last December, called upon the Arab states to "stand up to the Israeli danger." As I have indicated, however, Istiqlal is the only party that gives the impression of meaning what it says in this respect; for the others, a standard denunciation of Israel is as much a matter of convention as the routine invocation of God's blessing on one's hearers contained in all speeches and radio announcements, and is delivered with about as much sincerity.

sian forces are about the same distance away, half an hour's flying time from Iraq's northern frontier. In between lies the Iraqi army, some 30,000 strong, consisting of one "combat" division in the north, permanently pinned down keeping an eye on the Kurds; a second "combat" division and a little armor in the central plains, on call for tribal uprisings and trouble in Bagdad; and a training division whose units are scattered throughout the country. The basic aim of the organization, equipment, and training of the Iraqi army is to enable it, in the words of Feisal I, "to crush any two armed revolts which might break out simultaneously in different parts of the country." Anything more complicated than that is likely to fall outside its scope, and in the "holy war" on Britain in 1941 it was defeated fairly comfortably by a hastily gathered scratch force of British depot troops and Jordanian Legionnaires.

Since then the Iraqi army has received spasmodic training by harassed British military missions, and now the United States is reported to be considering re-equipping it. Recently I asked one of the three or four Britons best qualified to answer whether he considered the Iraqis morally and materially capable of carrying out a modest holding action against the Russians so as to give Western forces time to move in. My opinion was, admittedly, unrealistic since it assumed that the Iraqi government of the day would be not merely pro-Western but strong enough to keep the mob in its place even in the army's absence—a utopian premise. He replied: "Should you, by chance, be anywhere near Rutba [a desert outpost on the road to Syria] on the day the Russians cross the Caucasus you will observe, towards nightfall, a small puff of dust rapidly crossing the desert from east to west. That will be me. Linger awhile, for within half an hour or so you will see a much larger and more spectacular dust cloud speeding in the same direction. That will be the Iraqi army."